

A Storm-Bound Christmas

By
Dorothy
Douglas

HAD Wallingford been anything but a wealthy bachelor and accustomed to having everything he wanted, the circumstances would have seemed less of a calamity.

He had been on his way to San Francisco to spend Christmas with his favorite married sister, and midway, in the most barren desert of the country, a bridge had been swept away by winter gales. His destination could not possibly be reached until Christmas was well over.

Wallingford cast a glance out over the wide stretch of rolling plains with only a few scattered shacks to break their endless waste; and then he looked back to his bulging suitcase. The latest and most wonderful toys he could find in the city shops were crowded into that bag, for his sister's only boy. Then, not caring whether or not a highwayman might be looking in at the window of the parlor car, he took a small box from his waistcoat pocket and looked sorrowfully at a ring from which three exquisite diamonds flashed back at him.

Wallingford leaned back in his chair and in imagination pictured his sister's joy when slipping that ring on her finger. He could hear her scold him for his extravagance and chaff him for having no one else for whom to buy such baubles. He sighed and returned it to his pocket much as he might have cast it to the depths of the sea; it would do him as much good there as it would in his pocket under the present circumstances.

Wallingford was reconciled to a Christmas dinner over a lunch counter when his eye caught the name of Yankville. Yankville probably boasted a near-thousand inhabitant, yet Yankville also suggested the name of Every—Jack Every. When Wallingford had last heard of Jack Every the latter was located in Yankville. That was some eighteen months before, but there was no reason why he should not be there still.

It seemed that everyone in Yankville knew the Every homestead. It was the only one of any proportions in the village.

The red glow from an open fire within cheered Wallingford's numbed faculties as he rang the bell at the Every door.

On the face of her who opened the door, surprise was the principal expression. For Wallingford, his six-foot-two encased in a great fur coat all dangling with glistening snow beads and his handsome glowing face looking frankly into her own, was a surprise for any eyes.

She did not wait for him to explain his errand but with the matron's privilege of hospitality invited him into the warmth of the house.

"It was too cold to stand outside," she explained and waited for his question.

"I am Bob Wallingford," he began meeting the easy cordial expression of her blue eyes. "I am one of the belated passengers of the bridge tie-up and decided to run over and see if Jack Every would take pity on an old friend and—"

"Jack Every left Yankville," a smile played about her lips at mention of the illustrious village, "some six or seven months ago—"

Embarrassment, disappointment and surprise mingled equally in Wallingford's face and did not escape the eyes of Sylvia Vale. She spoke with ready tact.

"Take off that great coat, anyway, and come into the fireside. It's no night to be out."

Wallingford followed the slim gray-clad figure in a decidedly chaotic state of mind. Mingled with his embarrassment at having walked into an absolute stranger's house, was the sudden attraction he felt for this girl with the sunlit hair. Something—the combination perhaps—was making him feel like a tongue-tied schoolboy. It was a most unusual state of mind for Bob Wallingford.

There was a patter of little feet and a tiny boy of three years threw himself into Wallingford's arms.

"Oh-h! Are you Santa Claus?" he cried gleefully. "I heard your sleigh bells and saw your big fuzzy coat! Mamma, isn't he Santa Claus?"

The child's mother would have spoken but Wallingford's eyes pleaded for silence.

"You young rascal! You caught old Santa this time, didn't you? And he came especially to find out what you wanted him to bring down the chimney—"

"Wallingford! How in the name of all that's possible did you get here?"

Dick Elkins, an old chum of New York days, stood in the doorway and held out a glad hand of welcome.

A weight of relief fell from Wallingford's shoulders. He was no longer a stranger in a strange house. And did

he imagine it, or did a glad light come also into the eyes of the woman?

"How about yourself?" he asked when they had shaken hands.

"This is my own house and my own sister," laughed Elkins. "But where in the world did you and Mrs. Vale strike up an acquaintance?" He cast an interrogative glance at his sister.

"Sis, you never told me—"

Sylvia glanced quickly at Wallingford and a deep blush mingled with the glow from the fire in her cheeks. She explained the circumstances and Wallingford was quickly made to feel that he had come to the right house.

"I will stay under one condition only," he said finally, "and that is that you all will accept, without protest, the Christmas gifts which I brought for my sister and her family—without question."

There was a moment's silence and the promise was made, laughingly.

"But we will have to return the favor," brother and sister spoke as one voice.

So it was decided.

"Too bad Vale couldn't get here," remarked Elkins, later in the evening when, the small boy having been tucked into bed, the three sat about the blazing fire.

"Yes—we would have made a jolly quartet," said Sylvia.

Wallingford was almost guilty of a gasp. The calm, unconcerned way in which she remarked that her husband would have completed a quartet on Christmas eve had been able to get there, was rather disconcerting.

Dick Elkins arose and left the room to get the boy's toys.

"Bring down the suitcase in my room," cried Wallingford. He was as excited as a boy.

"You will not regret having promised to accept what I had bought for my sister?" Wallingford leaned slightly toward Sylvia's gray dress and through the strands of her golden hair, and the man in him had a struggle before quenching the light in his own eyes. It was the girl herself who was unable to hide a tremor.

"I promise," she said unsteadily. "But it seems—odd."

Dick returned, staggering under a load of toys. Then they all jumped gladly into the spirit of Christmas.

"When my husband was living," said Sylvia as she pinned up a tiny



Invited Him into the Warmth of the House.

stocking, "he always spoke of the day when he could do this—". The end of her sentence was drowned in the clatter of a huge box of blocks dropping to the hearthstone.

"Cheer up," said Wallingford; "wooden blocks don't break."

He stooped to pick the fallen toys and wondered if the woman pinning up the stocking beside him heard the thumping of his heart. A small box found its way into Sylvia's hand.

"Mrs. Vale, I can't keep this another minute," Wallingford said.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Dick when the flashing diamond ring was unwrapped. "You shouldn't expect to make sis take—"

"You promised." The eyes of the two men met and Elkins knew then and there what Wallingford's lips would speak.

With two of the opposite sex against her Sylvia had little chance to demur and with a tingling sensation in every nerve she slipped the ring on her right hand.

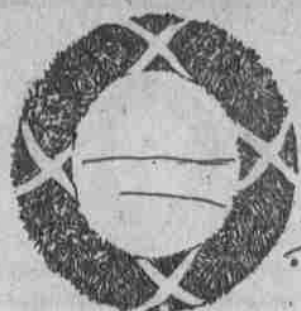
It was late the next night when the child had again been tucked in bed to dream of a wonderful day in the kingdom of toys with three grown-up people to play with him, that the three again sat about the open fire.

"I never spent a happier Christmas," said Wallingford with a glad ring in his voice.

"Nor I," put in Dick. "Vale missed a good time all right," he added sleepily. "Sis and her brother-in-law are quite smitten." And unaware of the havoc he had created in Wallingford's heart he took his departure for bed, leaving the two in silence.

But the silence was a complete one—one in which spoken words and thoughts were unnecessary. After a moment Wallingford leaned forward and compelled Sylvia's eyes and while he did so he took her right hand and removed the ring and put it firmly on the third finger of her left hand.

"Next Christmas," he said tenderly, "we will spend at our own fireside. It is all very sudden and very wonderful, Sylvia, but I always do important things suddenly and—love is always wonderful."



Holiday Greetings

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An Alarm at Night

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Bellview Items

There was a pie supper at our school house last night. Music was rendered by Walter Lundy and Miss Read and Herald True.

Mr. McKnight was in Liberal Monday and returned Tuesday.

There were several from Harmon, Floris and Mount Olive districts at the pie supper.

We hear that their were wedding in our vicinity Sunday.

Lewis Hammond is home from Reno county.

We hope Bill Woods got the pie he wanted the other night.

Every body is busy gathering their kafir corn and maize, of which their seems to be a large crop.

Mr. Dan Washburn is helping the Mr. Minton gather kafir corn this week.

Wm. Hammond is helping Clarence Washburn gather kafir corn.

Rev. Adams is holding meetings at the Pottsville schoolhouse this week.

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